AUTHORSHIP OF HEBREWS

*By **James M. Rochford***

Who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews? This question has plagued students of Scripture for centuries. We do not feel adequate to answer the question once and for all. However, we hope to make a case for Paul's authorship (or at least, someone very close to Paul), as well as review the evidence for other possible authors.

On the one hand, we hesitate in affirming Pauline authorship because this has been such a dogma in fundamentalist churches (We have often heard the joke: "It must've been Paul... *My King James Bible says so!*"). On the other hand, we think the evidence favors Pauline authorship (or at least Pauline *supervision*). While we are not at all dogmatic on this view, we think several lines of evidence support Pauline authorship (or at least Pauline supervision):

(1) STYLISTICALLY, there are many similarities between Hebrews and Paul's writings. For instance:

1. Only Paul (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-14) and the author of Hebrews (Heb. 13:3) use the term "the Body" to describe the Church.
2. Both are very close to Timothy (Heb. 13:23).
3. Both refer to the milk and meat of the Scripture (1 Cor. 3:1-3; Heb. 5:11-14).
4. Both quote Deuteronomy 32:35 in the same form (Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). Leon Morris writes, "It agrees exactly neither with the MT nor the LXX, though it is quoted in the same form in Romans 12:19." [1]
5. Both quote Habakkuk 2:4 (Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38).
6. Both emphasize the rhetorical "*we* know," rather than "*I*" Paul uses this many times (Rom. 2:2; 3:19; 7:14; 8:22; 1 Cor. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:1; 1 Tim. 1:8), as does the author of Hebrews (Heb. 10:30).
7. Both emphasize the old and new covenant. Paul writes about the old and new covenants (2 Cor. 3:4-11), and so does the author of Hebrews (Heb. 8:6-13; 10:15-18).
8. Both refer to the old covenant being a "shadow" of Christ (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1).

(2) CANONICALLY, Hebrews appears alongside Paul's letters. It appears in the P^{46} document dated to AD 200. [2] It wasn't moved to the "general epistles" until the sixth century AD (Codex Claromontanus). [3] While the Western church didn't accept the letter as Pauline until the 4th century AD, the Eastern church held that Paul was the author.

(3) HISTORICALLY, several church fathers affirmed Pauline authorship. For instance, **Clement of Alexandria** (AD 200) [4] and **Origen** (AD 250) [5]both believed in Pauline authorship. [6] **Pantaenus** (AD 180) was the founder of a catechetical school in Alexandria, and he believed the letter was both Pauline and canonical. [7]

ARGUMENTS AGAINST PAULINE AUTHORSHIP

Others have raised strong counterarguments and objections to Paul writing the letter which should be evaluated. This has led one eminent NT scholar to write: "We may say with certainty that the thought of the epistle is not Paul's, the language is not Paul's, and the technique of Old Testament quotation is not Paul's." [8] Let's consider some of these key objections below.

OBJECTION #1: THE GREEK IS TOO POLISHED TO BE PAUL

The author of Hebrews uses 169 unique words that do not occur anywhere else in the NT. [9] Moreover, Carson and Moo write, "The Greek of Hebrews is more polished than that of Paul, and the consistent quality of the rhetoric is quite remarkable." [10]

However, we would ask: Why should we be surprised to see such excellent Greek and brilliant rhetoric from Paul of all people? Paul was a brilliant theologian, well trained, and a disciple of the great Gamaliel. Paul's credentials actually seem to fit with what we read in Hebrews.

Of course, those who reject Paul as the author argue that this misses the point.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Surely Paul was a brilliant scholar, but the argument is in the fact that the language and style of Hebrews do not match the 13 letters of Paul. However, the argument from the Greek has also been exaggerated. Even though Allen rejects Pauline authorship, he still observes, "It appears to me that many times authors, especially modern authors, exaggerate the stylistic differences between Paul and Hebrews to the point of concluding the 'impossibility' of Pauline authorship. Although the stylistic argument—perhaps the most devastating argument—against Paul is formidable, it does not render the view impossible, merely highly unlikely, as judicious scholars note." [11]

In our estimation, the concepts are more valuable than the vocabulary. As one older scholar observed, "It breaths Paul's spirit, but it does not speak Paul's words." [12] Paul may have utilized an amanuensis to write this letter, as he did with his other letters (Rom. 16:22). Depending on how much freedom Paul gave to the scribe, this could change the Greek style and language significantly.

OBJECTION #2: ORIGEN SAID THAT NOBODY KNEW WHO WROTE THE EPISTLE

Scholars often quote Origen as saying, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows" (*Church History* 6.25.11-14). But when we read the context of this statement, we find that Origen affirmed that Paul supervised the writing of the epistle, and Origen questioning the identity of the amanuensis or the author under Paul's authority. Origen writes,

> "***That the character of the diction of the epistle entitled to the Hebrews has not the apostle's rudeness in speech, who confessed himself rude in speech, that is, in style, but that the epistle is better Greek in the framing of its diction, will be admitted by everyone who is able to discern differences of style. But again, on the other hand, that the thoughts of the epistle are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle, to this also everyone will consent as true who has given attention to reading the apostle.... But as for myself, if I were to state my own opinion, I should say that the thoughts are the apostle's, but that the style and composition belonged to one who called to mind the apostle's teachings and, as it were, made short notes of what his master said. If any church, therefore, holds this epistle as Paul's, let it be commended for this also. For not without reason have the men of old handed it down as Paul's. But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows. Yet the account which has reached us [is twofold], some saying that Clement, who was bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, others, that it was Luke, he who wrote the Gospel and the Acts.***"

Thus, when we read this section in context, we find that Origen himself thought that the "thoughts" are Paul's, and Pauline authorship was a "commended" view to hold. Origen was questioning who penned the letter for Paul or under Paul's supervision. Indeed, elsewhere, Origen affirmed Pauline authorship: "It should be noted that Origen included Hebrews among the Pauline letters, sometimes even citing it as 'Paul says'; it is not altogether surprising, therefore, that his pupils followed this pattern." [13]

OBJECTION #3: IF PAUL WROTE THE LETTER, THEN HE WOULD HAVE PUT HIS NAME ON THE LETTER

Paul always put his name in the beginning of his letter. Paul writes, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in *every letter*; this is the way I write" (2 Thess. 3:17). This raises difficulty for the view that Paul would write this letter anonymously. If Paul wrote Hebrews, then why didn't he put his name at the beginning, as was his custom?

Pantaenus (AD 180) was the first to suggest that the Jewish population was prejudiced against Paul, so he didn't put his name on the letter. [14]Since Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, he might have been rejected by many of the Jews in Jerusalem. This shouldn't surprise us. Paul had been regularly kicked out of synagogues for preaching the gospel. So, in order to avoid giving offense to these Jewish believers, **perhaps Paul intentionally left his name off of the letter.** In this way, the people would hear the *content* of Paul's letter—without being distracted by his *personal influence* on it. This also fits with the historical account in Acts, where Paul had made many enemies in Jerusalem:

"After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. [18] And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. [19] After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. [20] And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; [21] and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs'" (Acts 21:17-21).

Others counter that this view cannot be correct because the audience knew the author. At the end of the letter, we read, "Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. [19] And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner" (Heb. 13:18-19). He adds, "Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. [24] Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you" (Heb. 13:23-24). If the purpose of excluding his name from the letter was to be anonymous, then why do we read that the audience knew who wrote the letter?

This is a fair objection. However, this letter was a circular letter. This means that many people would read this besides the initial readers. Therefore, because a wider Jewish audience is in view, this explanation would still hold water.

OBJECTION #4: HEBREWS 2:3-4 PRECLUDES PAULINE AUTHORSHIP

The author of Hebrews writes, "After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, *it was confirmed to us by those who heard*, [4] God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Heb. 2:3-4). Here the author explains that he is a second-generation believer—not an eyewitness of Jesus. However, in Galatians 1.12, Paul writes, "For I neither received [the gospel] from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12). How could Paul write about himself as being a second-generation believer (Heb. 2:3-4), if he was so adamant in stating that he received his gospel directly from Christ (Gal. 1:12)?

The focus of this entire section of Hebrews is not on the apostolic transmission of the gospel message (as we find in Galatians). In fact, the author's purpose is get the focus off of the fact that God spoke through men in "many portions and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1). Instead, the author's focus in the context is to emphasize the revelation of the Son—not the apostles: "In these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:2). Therefore, Galatians 1 and Hebrews 1 are simply focusing on two entirely different themes.

Moreover, if Paul is indeed the author, it is possible that he was referring to the apostles who lived with Jesus during his earthly ministry (Heb. 2:3-4). Of course, Paul never lived with Jesus, and he travelled to Jerusalem to learn about this (Gal. 1:18). So, presumably, Paul would not take issue with the idea that he didn't know Jesus' earthly ministry or the initial miracles of the apostles. As Paul explained elsewhere, he was one "untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8).

OBJECTION #5: THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS ALWAYS CITES FROM THE SEPTUAGINT (LXX), WHILE PAUL CITES A VARIETY OF TRANSLATIONS AND PARAPHRASES

This argument fits with the notion that the author was a Hellenistic Jew with a deep training in the Greek language and Greek rhetoric. However, Paul frequently cites from the LXX (as do all of the other NT authors). The exclusive use of the LXX could say more about the audience or perhaps the amanuensis. Indeed, the Jerusalem church contained Hellenists (Acts 6). As Allen writes, "The LXX was used regularly even by Palestinian Jews in the first century." [15]

OTHER POSSIBLE AUTHORS

Again, we are not dogmatic in regard to Pauline authorship. Yet, Paul seems to be the best contender for the letter. That being said, we should briefly consider other possible authors here:

Possible Authors of Hebrews

POSSIBLE AUTHOR	PROS	CONS
Barnabas	Tertullian held this view, [16] as well as many other modern scholars (e.g. Salmon, Riggenbach, Edmundson, Bertelsmann, and J.A.T. Robinson). (1) He was a Levite (Acts 4:36). (2) He is the son of encouragement (Acts 4:36), and this would fit with the letter to the Hebrews being a work of encouragement (Heb. 13:22). (3) He was a close affiliate of	(1) There are no writings of Barnabas to use for comparison. It is complete conjecture. (2) The use of the word "encouragement" (*paraklesis*) is incredibly common in the NT. It shouldn't surprise us to be used of Barnabas and by the author of Hebrews.

	Paul's (Acts 9:27; 11:30; 13:1-14:28).	
Luke	(1) Pantaenus (AD 180) and Clement of Alexandria (AD 200) were the first to suggest that Paul wrote in Hebrew, but Luke translated the text into Greek.[17] Thomas Aquinas speculated on this.[18] Others argue that Luke wrote the epistle (e.g. Delitzsch, Eagar, David Allen). (2) The thesis was that Luke translated Paul's letter into Greek from Hebrew. Carson and Moo write, "Doubtless because of similarities between the Greek of Hebrews and the Greek of Luke-Acts, Clement supposes that Paul wrote to the Hebrews in Hebrew and suggests that our Greek text is Luke's translation (H.E. 6.14.2)."[19]	(1) Luke and Hebrews share 49 unique words, but Paul and Hebrews share 56.[20]Thus if we believe that similarities between writings should count as evidence, then this would actually bring us back to Pauline authorship. (2) The text states that "Luke wrote the gospel" (*ho graphas*). This more likely means "wrote," rather than "wrote down" as an amanuensis.[21]
Clement of Rome	(1) John Calvin made this suggestion.	(1) Clement wrote too late to have written Hebrews, which must antedate AD 70. Although, some do date Clement of Rome before AD 70 (see **"1 Clement"**). (2) The style differences are immense between the two letters. Cockerill notes, "1 Clement and Hebrews differ so vastly in style and content that one need give no further attention to the suggestion that Hebrews was written by Clement of Rome."[22] (3) Clement of Rome quotes Hebrews. Carson and Moo write, "Clement of Rome... [quotes] Hebrews in several places (though doubtless one could argue that he is quoting his own work!)."[23]
Apollos	(1) Martin Luther made this suggestion, as well as many modern scholars (e.g. Bleek, Manson, Montefiore, Nash, G. Guthrie, Witherington). (2) Acts 18:24 states that Apollos was "an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, [who] came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures." (3) Apollos was closely connected with Paul's work (1 Cor. 1-4).	(1) This view didn't arise among the Church Fathers until Martin Luther. Cockerill writes, "The Church Fathers never identify Apollos as the author of Hebrews."[24] (2) We have no known writings of Apollos to compare with Hebrews.
Priscilla and Aquila	(1) Harnack made this suggestion. (2) This would account for the switching of "we" to "I" in the book (because it could be coauthored with her husband, Aquila). (3) They knew the Scriptures well—even instructing a learned man like Apollos (Acts 18:26). (4) They were familiar with Timothy and Paul's work (Acts 18:5; 19:22; 1 Cor. 16:10, 19). 5. The author(s) may have not put a name on the letter, because of misogynistic	(1) The "we" and "I" switching is a rhetorical device—nothing more. (2) Many people were familiar with Paul and Timothy's work, so this isn't strong evidence. (3) The author uses the masculine singular in Hebrews 11:32, which precludes a female author (*diegoumenon*). (4) While the first century culture was misogynistic, the early church was not (see **"Christianity and Women"**).

tendencies in the early church.

CONCLUSION

There is a big difference between *pseudonymous* authorship and *anonymous* authorship. While we are not sure who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, this is different than reading a letter like the gospel of Thomas—**a fraudulent letter and false author**—who was trying to pass itself off as an apostle. Since there is good evidence that Hebrews was written before AD 70, this means that this letter was known and read by some of the apostles themselves. It is not likely that a false letter could have been circulating in the first century without the apostles censuring it. Moreover, anyone who has read Hebrews will quickly acknowledge how much it coheres with apostolic teaching! It has brilliant theological connections, a thorough understanding of the OT, and powerful insights into the new covenant. This is additional evidence for its inspiration and canonical status.

1. ^ Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 108.
2. ^ Carson and Moo write, "In the earliest text of Hebrews that has come down to us—P46 (early third century)—this epistle is placed in the Pauline corpus, right after Romans." D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 600.
3. ^ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 3.
4. ^ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.14.3.
5. ^ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.25.11-14.
6. ^ Carson and Moo write, "In particular, both Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150-215) and Origen (185-253) preserve the tradition that Paul is the author of Hebrews, even though they recognize the difficulties attached to the view." D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 600-601.
7. ^ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 4.
8. ^ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 20.
9. ^ Cockerill notes, "Hebrews uses 169 words that appear nowhere else in the NT." Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 7.
10. ^ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 601.
11. ^ Allen cites E. Linnemann's three-part article: "A Call for a Retrial in the Case of the Epistle to the Hebrews," trans. D. E. Lanier, *Faith and Mission* 19/2 (2002): 19-59. David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 35.
12. ^ Delitzsch, *Hebrews*, 2:407.
13. ^ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 20.
14. ^ Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14), quoting Clement of Alexandria's *Hypotyposes*. This was also the view of Clement of Alexandria. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 601.
15. ^ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 84-85.
16. ^ Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 20.
17. ^ Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14), quoting Clement of Alexandria's *Hypotyposes*.
18. ^ T. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. C. Baer (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2006), 7.
19. ^ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 601.
20. ^ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 9.
21. ^ Bleek, *Introduction*, 2:106; J. H. Thayer, "Authorship and Canonicity of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *BSac* 24 (1867): 707-8.
22. ^ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 8.
23. ^ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 602.
24. ^ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 9.